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ABSTRACT

The need to underline the relationship between spoken and written language in second language instruction is discussed, and the use of student dialogue journals to accomplish this is encouraged. The first section offers an overview of the whole language approach, which emphasizes integration of language skills. The second section examines briefly how and under what conditions writing and speaking can be considered to entail similar processes. The dialogue journal is defined and its suitability for the conversation class is explored in the third section, and specific procedures for integrating the dialogue journal into classroom activities are offered in the fourth section. It is concluded that there is intuitive appeal in the linking of written and oral language skills, further research into this relationship is needed in several areas. Contains 21 references. (MSE)

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A Rationale to Integrate Dialog Journal Writing in the Foreign Language Conversation Class

Concepcion B. de Godev

Abstract: This article aims at bringing attention to the need of underlining the similarities between spoken and written output processes. The first part of the article is an overview of the theory of whole language. The second part examines the whole language theory as it applies to the connections between written and spoken discourse. The third part addresses the issue of how the whole language theory can be carried over to the teaching/learning scenario in the context of the conversation class by using dialog journals. The last two sections provide a definition of dialog journals and procedures to integrate this type of writing in the foreign language conversation class.

Key Words: conversation class, curriculum, dialog journals, discourse, free writing, guided writing, hypothesis testing, schemata, whole language theory, writing/speaking relationships

I. Theory of whole language

When it comes to comparing written and spoken language, the foreign language researcher faces three caveats. First, the literature on the subject is scarce; second, most of the existing literature addresses issues pertaining to English as L1; and third, a big portion of the available literature focuses on the differences between written and spoken language (Tannen 1982, 3), thus paying virtually no attention to what the two modes of expression have in common.

In the United States, the traditional separation between speaking and writing yielded programs in the L1 where speech and writing are taught separately. The epitome of this separation is the existence of speech communication departments, where speech courses are taught, and English departments, where instruction in writing is provided (Ochs 1986, 5-6).

This separation is oftentimes emulated in the context of the L2 at the intermediate level. At this level, language curriculums frequently offer conversation courses with no writing or vice versa. It can also be observed that even in the instance

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when writing and speaking are combined, the types of discourse[1] used in both modes of expression are so different that it is virtually impossible for students to draw on one mode to help their performance in the other mode.

In the L2 arena, the separation between speaking and writing activities may reflect both the tradition in English as L1, as well as the audiolingual tradition. The effect of the latter has led to the belief that oral skills, namely, listening and speaking, should precede written skills, that is reading and writing, thus emulating in the L2 the L1 natural sequence of language skills acquisition.

The counterpart to the literature approaching oral and written phenomena as independent or far apart from each other lies on the philosophical and pedagogical current known as WHOLE LANGUAGE. One of the most devoted theorists of whole language is K. Goodman (1986). The key concept in the type of pedagogy Goodman favors is the concept of INTEGRATION of skills. Goodman's idea of whole language rests upon the premise that language is more easily acquired when teaching and learning are all inclusive, contextualized and purposeful.

Along the lines of the whole language philosophy, there is a limited literature laying off the idea of speech and writing being linguistic facets inserted in a continuum. This line of research suggests that, as part of a continuum, writing and speaking sometimes share so many characteristics that it is not always easy to decide what in the continuum is speech and what is writing (Hornberger 1989, 282; Dickinson 1987, 152-3). Throughout this continuum we may find pieces of writing that have little in common with oral texts, as is the case of the oral delivery of a paper presented at a conference. Moreover, we may find written samples resembling a great deal of casual everyday speech as is the case of theatrical scripts. The observation of this some times evasive difference between written and oral texts yielded the following reflection on the part of Magnan (1985):

> Is everything presented through the voice to be considered speech? Consider, for example, talking books for the visually impaired, taped editorials played over the

> radio, a formal after dinner speech read from a podium, a telephone sales presentation, all examples of written texts read aloud. Do they then constitute writing? They begin in written form, but they are delivered orally (117).

One of the most illuminating studies on what it is that characterizes speech and writing is the one carried out by Tannen in 1982. The results of her study led her to conclude that writing and speech do not hold intrinsic differences. In other words, what makes a difference is not the fact of putting a message in writing or oral mode; it is the purpose, the register and the context accompanying the message what determines the type of discourse (18-19). This conclusion is also the result of a study conducted by Beaman (1984, 70-5).

Mangelsdorf (1989, 136) also favors the opinion that written and oral production should not be drastically separated on grounds that such separation may inhibit associations between the oral and written mode that could be useful to the L2 learner. She supports this opinion by reporting on a quasi experiment in which ESL students had to both write and speak. Her observation was that these students had been able to absorb more linguistic material in one semester than students developing writing and speaking skills in separate courses.

Krashen also questions the utility of separating writing and speaking, and in this regard he says:

> Most language teaching programs, if they are subdivided into components, divide up into the 'four skills," speaking, listening, reading and writing. Evidence from a variety of sources indicates that this may not be the optimal decision. First, in every program I have been associated with, teachers who are asked to focus on just one of the four skills or even two (oral versus written), complain that such divisions are artificial (1988, 100).

Oller also makes a statement as to what he thinks of approaching the teaching of the different skills in isolation from each other:

> In spite of all the remaining uncertainties, it seems safe to suggest that the current practice of many ESL programs, textbooks, and curricula of separating listening, speaking, and reading and writing activities is probably not just pointless but in fact detrimental (1979, 457-8).

In spite of the advocacy more and more professed by some researchers in favor of the integration of skills, it needs to be said that hard data are still to be produced, especially to determine to what degree writing might have an influence over speaking. To the best of my knowledge, Barba (1992, 119) has conducted the only study in foreign language acquisition research that examines the effect of writing over speaking. The results of her study suggest that students' speaking fluency can in fact be fostered when in class free writing is performed as part of the class routine and provided certain conditions are met.

Notwithstanding the scarcity of empirical evidence, a case can still be made for the possible benefits of combining speaking and writing in the foreign language curriculum on grounds of the theory of learning. Keeping in mind the views of Ervin-Tripp (1974, 122), Brown (1987, 80-1) and Bialystok (1983, 105), who claim that the learning process takes place on the basis of previous information, be it innate or acquired, it is plausible to think that writing might function as a sort of schemata on which the L2 learner leans to accomplish oral production. Along these lines, Ausubel (1964, 423) thinks that at the first stages of L2 learning, writing may facilitate word boundary distinctions and may help to remember structures and vocabulary. Ausubel further claims that it is 'unnatural to assume that after an individual becomes literate he will learn in the same way as when he is illiterate' (423). In other words, it is intuitively appealing to think that literacy opens avenues for the literate learner that may significantly deviate from those available to the illiterate or naive one. Once again, it is

on grounds of this reasoning that the role of writing in the oral performance of the L2 learner finds its justification.

II. How and under what conditions writing and speaking can be considered to entail similar processes

Assuming that in fact writing might have a positive effect over speaking, it is reasonable to wonder whether any type of writing can trigger that positive effect or not. Going by the association principles that seem to organize the learning process, it is logical to think that the closer the written discourse to the spoken discourse the easier it will be to transfer knowledge acquired through writing when speaking.

The type of speech usually practiced in most so called L2 conversation classes is characterized by an informal conversation type of discourse about a topic usually familiar to the student. The conversation may be a simulated one, triggered by means of situation cards; or it can be a real conversation on a class issue students want to discuss, a problem a student poses to the class to seek advice or the discussion of a movie, news or a book. Informal conversational discourse exhibits frequent false starts, namely, sentences dropped unfinished; self-corrections, that is, speakers correct themselves upon realizing they made a mistake. Other features characterizing conversational discourse are topic shifts within a short time and turn taking on the part of the interlocutors intervening in the linguistic exchange.

III. Definition of Dialog Journal and why it is suitable for the conversation class

The kind of writing that parallels informal conversation as described above is dialog journal writing because it mirrors many of the features typically found in conversation. Dialog journals (DJ from now on) as defined by Jones 'are essentially

written conversations between a student and teacher, kept in a bound notebook, or on a computer disk or file. Both partners write back and forth, frequently, and over a period of time about whatever interests them. Their goal is to communicate in writing, to exchange ideas and information free of the concern for form and correctness so often imposed on developing writers' (1991, 3).

Here is an example of journal entries:

STUDENT:

Hoy en mi clase de español nosotros hablamos de los problema de Wendy y Allan. Ellos tienen problemas con sus compañeros de cuarto. En estas situacciones no hay una solución fácil. Hay muchas partes de los problemas. Cada persona tiene sentidos differentes del problema. En el problema de Wendy, yo trataría hablar con mi compañera de cuarto. Diría que nosotros trabajamos con el uno con el otro. Los compañeros de cuarto necesitan dar el uno con el otro respeto. Aprendemos (to compromise?) para que podemos vivir en el mismo cuarto.

TEACHER:

¿Te llevas bien con tu compañera o compañeras de cuarto?

STUDENT:

El año pasado mi compañera y yo nos llevemos bien, pero solamente por un medio año. Durante el invierno, mi compañera empezó molestarme (?). Ella hablaría mientras yo trataría hacer mi tarea. También ella escucharéia a su música que no me gustaba. Pero ahora yo vivo con mi amiga buena. Mi compañera y yo estamos en "Navy" con una con el otra. Tenemos el mismo gusto en música y ropa (¡y amigos!).

Claro, mi compañera nueva me molestará en el futuro, pero nosotros hablamos mucho tan nosotroas podríamos arreglar el problema. Mi compañero 'vieja" nunca habló con mi. Por eso nuestros problemas crecieron hasta por fin.....BOOM!

TEACHER:

¿Qué tipo de música y ropa te gusta?

STUDENT:

Me gusta muchos tipos de música. Especialmente me gusta 'classic Rock". El Rock de la 60's y 70's es muy bieno. Me divertido cuando yo escucho a esta música porque la música tiene un historia que influye mucho gente. La música dice una cuenta de la gente de la tiempo que nace (?).

Mi compañera de cuarto (el año pasado) escuchó a Classic Rock a veces. Per más del tiempo ella escuchó a música extraña...differente. La música me molestó porque las palabras fueron en mal gusto y la música no tenía artistos talentos. Pienso que todo el mundo tenga un opion distinto. Pero si ella no le gustaba mi música, no la tocaría cuando ella estuvo en el cuarto o llevaría 'headphones" tan ella no podía escuchar a música. Escuchando a música me ayuda a descansar.

The reason why dialog journal writing can successfully be integrated in the conversation class without off-tracking the learner from the type of discourse typical of the conversational speech is that DJ is interactive. Indeed, this is a type of writing that calls for the collaboration of at least two writers. Moreover, the interaction that takes place in DJs allows for an equal share of effort on the part of both writers to keep the communication flow going.

DJ writing is interactive in almost the same way a conversation is since the writers can carry out many of the functions susceptible to occur in a conversation such as informing, requesting, thanking, expressing regret, and expressing opinions and feelings.

Another feature that makes this type of writing close to the conversational discourse is that the writer does not write to an abstract audience. The reader of this

type of writing is a concrete individual the writer is acquainted with and because of this circumstance the writing occurs in a meaningful context and always has a guiding purpose provided by the stimulus of the co-writer's writing.

One feature that makes DJ writing unique is the fact that errors are allowed in this type of writing. The explanation for this liberal treatment of errors in DJ lies on the fact that from the very outset[2], when Mrs. Reed started to use it in her elementary school, this activity was meant as a way to establish individualized and personalized communication with each student in the classroom. Communication of ideas has always been the main focus of DJ practitioners in the belief that, once freed of the concern for perfection, writers may find writing more rewarding.

One of the reasons to incorporate DJs in the conversation class rests on the principle that students should be given ample opportunities to produce in the target language. It is probably common knowledge that heterogeneity is a characteristic of most language classes, and one of the areas where such heterogeneity shows is the readiness to speak on the part of students. It is often the case that students will say far less than what is on their minds just because they are embarrassed to talk, afraid to be laughed at or not able to control the flaws in their speech. In the most extreme situation, the teacher will often be confronted with the case of one or more students who will but rarely speak at all. In this case DJ writing time constitutes the component of the conversation class that still gives a chance for the shiest students to participate.

Finally, another reason to incorporate DJ in the conversation is that the process of hypothesis testing, process believed to have a role in second language acquisition (Bley-Vroman 1986, 353-4; Mangelsdorf 1989, 139), is easier and more effective to carry out when writing than when speaking. The reason for this is that when speaking, time pressure and stress do not allow for hypothesis elaboration and testing. Even in the instance certain individuals might be able to formulate a hypothesis, chances are they might not get much out of it if the hypothesis is wrong since oftentimes teachers have to overlook mistakes for the sake of keeping the flow of the conversation going. Thus, in

incorporating DJ writing in the conversation class, students are provided with the opportunity to reflect on the language because when writing they are freed from the time pressure experienced when speaking.

IV. How to integrate the dialog journal in the conversation class

Different procedures can be adopted when it comes to integrating DJs in the conversation class; typically the instructor will have to make a decision as to the type of procedures that best matches the goals, objectives and students of a given course.

Some practitioners prefer to carry out the DJ activity as part of the homework so not to 'waste" class time. This writer prefers to have students write their journals in class for several reasons. First, if DJ time is allocated during the very last minutes of the class period, students still have fresh in their minds the vocabulary, structures and content that came up in class and they can readily be incorporated in the entry for the day if students choose to do so. Second, in doing DJ writing in class, there is more guarantee that students will do their best since they do not feel this activity is taking away time they could use in leisure activities or otherwise, therefore the urge to rush through it is eliminated. Third, students can get the most out of DJs when doing it in class because they have sources of information other than the dictionary such as their classmates and their teacher. Fourth and a very important reason, when DJ writing is done in class, the outcomes of the activity are more reliable in terms of comparability because time is controlled since every student is given the same amount of time. With the time being controlled, it is possible to assess the progress of a student by comparing the first entries to the last ones as well as to compare progress across students.

As far as amount of time to be allocated for this activity, this writer has found that for fifty-minute class periods the ideal is to use the last ten minutes of the class period, namely, 20% of the class. Ten minutes allow just enough time so the teacher

can handout the journals to the students and so students can read the teacher's entry and write the new entry for the day.

It is advisable to present students with a handout explaining what DJ writing is all about before they are asked to write their first entry. An information sheet along the lines of the one given below may be used:

1. Your instructor will establish a written dialogue with you and this dialogue will develop by means of questions and comments related to the content of your daily entries.

2. You will write in your journal for the last ten minutes of every class period.

3. You may use your instructor's questions and comments as a starting point for the next journal entry.

4. You may include in your journal any topic, piece of information or ideas that are appealing to your interest, curiosity or mood. Following there is a list of topics that can give you some ideas on what to write about in your journal:
   - new words and expressions
   - comments on new words and expressions
   - comments on instructor and students
   - real or fictitious stories
   - anecdotes, activities, family or friends
   - books and movies

5. Dialogue journal writing will help you to reflect on the material covered in class and therefore will facilitate its assimilation.

6. Grammar will not be corrected unless you explicitly request that it be corrected.

7. This activity will be included in your final grade as part of your participation grade.

As far as the topics to be addressed in the DJ, it is up to the professor to decide whether students should write about anything they might be interested in or whether students should address specific class related issues suggested by the teacher.

If the conversation class has a reading component as an outside class activity, the DJ activity can be guided so students are challenged to reflect further on the reading done at home (Kessler 1989, 2-3; Steffensen 1989, 20-1). Asking students to elaborate on a topic discussed in class would be another option to have some control over the topic and thus ensure that students use a variety of vocabulary and morphosyntactic structures. A compromise between completely free-topic writing and guided-topic writing can be reached by doing free-topic writing during the first half of the semester and guided-topic writing during the second half of the semester.

V. Conclusion

The issue of aiming at whole language is very much in need of empirical studies that enable us to determine what exactly works for the foreign language student in terms of how the practice of certain skills can help to build up others. As of now we can count on a theory that has been only partially put to the test by a few researchers. Some advances have been made in the study of the effect of listening upon speaking, and reading over writing. However, very little is known on the extent of the impact of writing upon speaking, this is a research area virtually unexplored. What aspects of speaking can writing enhance the most need to be determined . Does writing help to make vocabulary more easily accessible for use in speech? Does writing contribute to

internalizing communicative strategies such as circumlocution and make it more available in the speaking mode? Does writing have any bearing on how fast learners can incorporate linguistic structures in their speech? All these questions have to be addressed to find out whether in the situation of the foreign language learner there are pedagogical reasons that advise the practice of writing in the context of the conversation class. It is intuitively appealing that writing may ultimately affect areas of second language acquisition development that may make the practice of writing necessary, not only because of literacy acquisition in the target language but also for pedagogical reasons.

Notes

1 'Communication routines which they [members of all societies] view as distinct wholes, separate from other types of discourse, characterized by special rules of speech and non-verbal behavior, and often distinguished by clearly organized openings and closings' (Gumperz 1977, 17).

2 Mrs. Reed started to use and systematically develop DJ back in the mid-1960's (Staton 1988, xi).

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